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Book Review of M Signoli, D Chevé, P Adalaina, G Boëtsch, O Dutour (editors) 2007  
Plague: epidemic and societies. Florence, Firenze University Press

For *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*.

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This book represents the Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Congress on the Evolution and Palaeoepidemiology of the Infectious Diseases (ICEPID) which was held in Marseille in July 2001. The Congress followed three other very successful Congresses on the treponemal diseases (Dutour et al. 1994), tuberculosis (Pálfi et al. 1999) and leprosy (Roberts et al 2002). It was fitting that the Congress took place in a city where there had recently been excavation and analyses of plague victims from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century AD. As a participant at the Congress in Marseille, I was surprised to see such a great number of scholars attending and presenting on the plague in past populations, primarily because the plague does not cause any skeletal changes (and most scholars work on human skeletal remains in palaeopathology!). However, with the developments in using ancient DNA analysis to detect pathogens over the previous 10 or so years, detecting people who had suffered from the plague had become possible. Nevertheless, this volume is not just about ancient pathogen DNA analysis of human remains for the plague.

The book is divided into five sections with a total of 51 chapters: History of the illness and its treatment (eight chapters), Biological and archaeological evidence (13 chapters), Historical data (eight chapters), including that from demography, Epidemiology (13 chapters), and Representations of the epidemic (nine chapters). Chapters are either written in French or English. Sometimes the chapters have both English and French abstracts (and titles), sometimes chapters have one or the other, and occasionally there is no abstract. I think that it would have been helpful to have both languages represented for all abstracts (and the Preface and Introduction), particularly for those of us who are not fully bilingual! Consistency in general with the format of each paper would have aided appreciation of their content too. However, very usefully, there is a bibliography at the end of each chapter and also a collated bibliography at the end of the volume. Many of the images are good and clear but some are of poorer quality; on the whole the figures are of better quality than the photographs.

The first section includes papers on plague in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mediterranean areas focusing on historical frequency data (Mafart/Brisou); this section also includes a chapter on early 20<sup>th</sup> century plague in Marseille (Mafart *et al*), and 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century plague epidemics in Finland (Vuorinen), Finland surprisingly 'missing' the 14<sup>th</sup> century epidemic that affected neighbouring Sweden and Russia. Section 2, focusing on biological archaeological data for the plague, has two papers on a plague cemetery dated to 1590 excavated from the site of the hospital of Fédons, Lambesc (Bizot *et al*/Bouttevin

*et al*); the first documents the funerary context of the site and the second focuses on the health of those buried there, indicating that people suffered a variety of health problems prior to their death from plague. Various papers in this section also focus on: dental enamel hypoplasia in 18<sup>th</sup> century plague victims at the Observance cemetery in Marseille (Pettenati-Soubayroux *et al*), plague in Colonial Period Ecuador (Ubelaker), where a higher younger mortality was found in a Quito cemetery population during an historically documented plague epidemic, and plague seen in parish record data from Barton-on-Humber, England from 1593 AD when, on the basis of skeletal evidence, more people died than in other years (Waldron). Section 3 (Historical data) includes chapters that consider life witness documents for the 18<sup>th</sup> century Provence region plague (Buti), where private correspondence provides real insights into its impact, and on 17<sup>th</sup> century plague epidemics in Granada, Spain, based on parish registers; here, increases in mortality for these plague years are documented. Section 4 focuses on a number of studies that record epidemiological and microbiological aspects of the plague. For example, Bianucci *et al.* use a method of analysis used on living people that tests whether *Yersinia pestis* F1 antigen (indicating cause of death) was present in skeletons from the plague epidemics of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in France; some positive results were found. Prentice *et al* also describes their analysis of *Y. pestis* of dental pulp from teeth of 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century plague victims from France and 13<sup>th</sup> century and 1348 victims from London; here, positive data resulted from the French site but not for the English site, suggesting a number of reasons for failure such as poor preservation of aDNA. In this section there are also two chapters that document plague in vectors such as the black rat, fleas and other animals in Madagascar (Duchemin *et al*) and in Brazil (Paiva de Almeida *et al*). A further fascinating paper by Zink *et al* documents (through aDNA analysis) tuberculosis in some of the plague victims from the 1722 Marseille Observance cemetery, suggesting that TB probably predisposed people to contracting plague later. Section 5 has an interesting consideration of teaching of plague in medical schools in France today, revealing that plague teaching is rare or absent in many university medicine courses; the same may be said for leprosy, perhaps reflecting the fact that some diseases are just more important than others in living populations today. Additionally, two papers by Chevé and Boëtsch look at the representation of the body afflicted by the plague in the Middle Ages, and Puccio describes political representations of the plague.

In summary, this monograph has something for everyone interested in the plague, both past and present. It should appeal to medical historians, medical doctors, palaeopathologists, and biomolecular scientists. It shows the virtue of focusing on one disease and bringing together people from different disciplines in an attempt to explore its impact on society.

## References

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